

## The Berry Trophy Room

By: Indigo Rho

Silas tilted his head and let the rest of his apple cider pour down his throat. The green zebra carefully adjusted his cowboy hat so it wouldn't fall off. He looked at the empty bottle and nodded before setting it down on the bar counter. "That's good, Ezra. Real good."

A tall, blue flamingo on the other side of the bar grinned. "There's a reason the state's known for its apples."

The pair were the only ones in the top floor rec room of the Rho Lambda Lambda frat house. The TV was dark and the speakers quiet. Most of the frat was on a weekend camping trip, leaving the house a shadow of its usual, bustling self. Silas had only ever seen it during parties, when guests packed the place and the noise rattled the foundations. The place was strange without the crowds.

If not for Ezra, he'd have felt like a trespasser. He only knew the flamingo through a couple of shared classes and recent parties on campus, but they'd gotten along well. He had the feeling—or at least the hope—they were becoming fast friends. Taste-testing ciders and sodas all afternoon had certainly been enjoyable, even if the zebra could feel his belly slosh a little when he moved.

Silas looked at the rows of empty bottles the pair had produced. "I still can't believe your frat brews all this themselves."

"It's an old tradition," Ezra said, turning a bottle over in his talon. "I know you're from the farm house, but a long time ago, we used to be called the Hops House. We had a bunch of members who grew up in the brewery and bottling industry."

"The only nickname I've heard for ya is Berry House," Silas smirked. "Not that I've seen many around the place." The only one had been a massive blue cheetah who'd lumbered past them on the way in with all the grace of a runaway train. He'd struggled to figure out how much of their bulk was from juice and how much was from good old blubber.

"It only takes a few prominent berries for a name to stick. Doesn't hurt that our frat president, Jonas, is a berry. And of course, most of the juice we use in our ciders and sodas comes from berries. The money we make from

that goes a long way towards funding the frat house,” Ezra said with pride.

“When the profits aren’t being guzzled down by the likes of us,” Silas laughed. A small belch escaped his lips.

“Well we’ve got so much of the stuff, it’s hard to resist.” Ezra cracked open a fresh blueberry cider. The label showed the swollen face of a blue bear with juice trickling down the corners of his grinning mouth. Ezra took a long swig. “Why do you think my feathers are blue?”

“Not from this stuff.” Silas gestured towards the bottles. “You’re way too thin to be chugging that much cider.”

Ezra shrugged his shoulders. “Damn, most people forget about that when I lie to them. I’m pretty sure I got my color from my grandpa on my mom’s side. He’s a blue parrot. But I *do* drink my fair share of cider. I’ve ended up as a berry a lot, too.”

Berries were a common sight on campus. Silas couldn’t remember a single class where he hadn’t had at least one berry classmate squeezed into their desk. He’d even had a berry professor. Watching them waddle and slosh around the lecture hall had been a strange experience. Berrification was becoming more widespread every year.

“I’ve never actually turned into a berry myself,” Silas admitted. “Though I inflate myself with air fairly often.”

“They’re very different experiences, trust me.” Ezra put his drink down and leaned over the counter. Even then, he loomed a bit over Silas. “For one, there’s the weight of it. Imagine draining a pool and being filled to the brim. Every ounce of liquid pushing at your taut hide. And it’s not still, either. It swirls and sloshes, in near perpetual motion. The taste of juice lingers fresh on your tongue, so you feel like you’re constantly taking a sip of something sweet.” The flamingo sighed blissfully. “You really should try it.”

“I don’t know. There are a lot of risks involved.”

“Any more than pumping yourself full of air like a balloon?” Ezra asked. “You don’t seem like the sort to worry about a silly thing like popping.” He snorted.

The possibility of bursting was infamously exaggerated. Even a sharpened set of claws or talons weren’t guaranteed to pop someone. Pointy corners on furniture were simply uncomfortable, not deadly. “I’m not. I was thinking more about becoming a permaberry. I can’t say I’m

interested in having to get juiced every single day. Not to mention the weight gain." Juice was notoriously fattening. Many who ended up as permaberries packed on the pounds, like the cheetah he'd seen earlier.

"Not *all* permaberries need to get juiced daily. And aside from a couple notable exceptions, the frat's berries haven't gained more weight than the average college student. They gained their bellies from cheap dining hall burgers, not berry juice," Ezra insisted.

"That still sounds inconvenient."

"And unlikely. As long as you use a safe, controlled method of inflation and limit your time as a berry to a few hours, you'll be fine. I've swelled up into all kinds of berries, yet I haven't got a drop of juice in me. *Bworrrip!*" Ezra clamped a talon around his beak far too late. "Other than what I've been drinking with you, of course."

The flamingo had a point. Plenty of Silas' friends had turned into berries before without the condition becoming permanent. And even then, the word permanent was a bit of a misnomer. Methods of undoing long-term berrification existed. They just required a considerable amount of time and money. And sometimes luck.

"I'll consider it," Silas relented. Ezra's description had piqued his interest, and he enjoyed having more excuses to grow round.

"Why don't you try right now?" Ezra asked, smiling. "We've got an ample supply of special ciders and plenty of room up here to play around. I doubt anyone will interrupt us."

Normally, Silas would've said no so he could think on the matter more. But the buzz he had from the cider left him feeling bold and he hadn't inflated in close to a month. "And if I say yes, how do ya plan on juicing me?"

Ezra reached beneath the counter and pulled out a keg tap. "One glass at a time." Silas scowled at the suggestion, prompting Ezra to wave his talons. "Joking. We've got a juicer in the basement. I assume that's acceptable?"

"Can't say I'm looking forward to it, but sure." He had no fondness for deflation in general, and doubted juicing would be any different. It felt so much more awkward than inflation, and represented the end to his fun. But that fun more than made up for it.

“Awesome! Let me find a good first swell for you.” Ezra turned to the bar’s fridge and began digging around inside. He wiggled his butt and his tail feathers as he searched. “Oh, oh this is perfect.” Bottles clinked together and the flamingo emerged with a pale pink drink. The label had alternating lines of dark and light green. He set the bottle on the counter before Silas. “Watermelon cider. It’ll compliment your stripes.”

For a brief moment, Silas imagined himself as an enormous watermelon, and blushed. “You’re lucky I like watermelon.” He opened the bottle and raised it to his lips. Hesitation returned, as he reminded himself the drink was guaranteed to fill him with juice. It wouldn’t be like inflating with air. He couldn’t just turn the pump off and squeeze the air out of himself. But the allure of becoming round proved irresistible.

Silas took a long swig of the cider. The taste equaled anything else he’d sampled that afternoon. Emboldened, he chugged the rest of it. He added the empty bottle to the rest and stifled a belch. A slight chill emanated from his stomach, but any cold drink would’ve caused that.

“So, how do I know it’s working?” he asked. He relived the unease and curiosity of his first time inflating with air. He’d been drunk then, too, and surrounded by his frat brothers. They’d been playing a game called Cattle Rustling, where one team tried to steal cattle—actually inflated pledges—from another. Being rolled and bounced around the field had awakened his joy of inflation, where others had obtained a dizzy disdain for it.

“Just relax and wait for the transformation. I’ll tell you when it starts.”

Silas stood perfectly still, as if any sudden movement would cause the drink to fizzle out before it could even begin. Suddenly, Ezra grinned. “Check yourself out in the mirror.” He nodded his head toward the mirror on the nearby wall.

Silas looked, and his jaw fell open. The white portions of his face gradually turned light green, as if he were being dipped in paint. His naturally green stripes darkened some, but the change was far less noticeable. “Well shit,” he said, smiling. He angled his head to watch the green spread down his neck and out of sight. The taste of watermelon returned to his tongue, like he’d just taken another gulp of cider.

He’d seen others transform, but witnessing the changes in himself brought thrill rather than amusement. There was no turning back. No

matter what he did, he'd be a giant, sloshing watermelon in a few minutes. He held up his hooves and looked in awe as they changed color before his very eyes. He ran his fingers along an arm, but it didn't feel any different to the touch, at least not yet. Some berries gained a glossy coat in imitation of fruit.

The swelling was abrupt, and startled him. His chubby middle rapidly ballooned outward, like it did when he turned his air pump to the highest setting. He'd expected a slower inflation, and stared in awe at his expanding belly.

His shirt clung skin tight and the button of his jeans popped off, ricocheting off the bar. In his haste to experience a new kind of inflation, he'd forgotten he wasn't wearing expandex clothing. "Damn it," he laughed, knowing he couldn't possibly slip out of his clothes in time. Seams ripped loudly, incapable of containing the zebra's ballooning body. His green gut bulged out and shredded his clothes. "Sorry about that." Speaking sloshed the juice bubbling inside him pleasantly.

Ezra snorted. "Every berry bursts out of their clothes sooner or later."

Silas didn't have time to dwell on the screw-up, captivated by his transformation. As Ezra had said, he could feel the dramatic increase in his weight as he swelled. He couldn't bounce around like he usually did while inflating with air. Moving in general felt precarious, so he stood in place. On a whim, he slapped his exposed belly with a hoof and earned a heavy *thump* in response. It sounded more like a drum than a balloon. He slapped it a few more times, listening to the tone change as his body expanded and his hide grew taut.

Every part of the zebra swelled. He briefly took on a pear shape before his chest caught up with his rump and he became a ball. His limbs bulged and stiffened, sinking steadily into his massive body. His neck and cheeks puffed up, rounding out his face. Watermelon juice constantly splashed and swirled within him, as if an unseen hose were the source. The motion tickled him with small spikes of pressure.

With each passing second, Ezra looked less like a zebra and more like an enormous watermelon. Limbs vanished, leaving only his fidgety hooves disrupting the curve of his spherical form. His chest swelled against his chin, limiting his ability to turn his head.

With a pump, he had total control over when the inflation started and stopped. With the cider, he could only wait until his body decided to finish transforming. On incredibly rare occasions, some simply swelled until they burst. His heart rate increased, but the fear couldn't drown out the pleasure.

When the pool of juice within him settled down, he realized he'd stopped inflating. He looked at the mirror and felt his face warm up. He saw a watermelon staring back at him.

Ezra came around the bar, smiling wide. He tapped Silas' taut side. "So, how does it feel to be a living watermelon?"

"This is so weird," Silas said in awe. "All this weight makes me feel like a boulder. I'm not any bigger around than when I inflate with air, but I feel a hundred times bigger, like I should be blimping out of the frat house right now." He giggled and hiccuped. "Oof, how alcoholic was that cider?"

"It wasn't," Ezra laughed.

"Then why do I feel like I just chugged a pitcher?"

"Because your body probably produced a bit of alcohol along with all the juice. It's a pretty common side effect of turning into a berry after a few drinks. You're kind of like a big cider keg right now. Booze helps make the experience more relaxing, though." Ezra patted Silas again. Any touch to the zebra's taut and sensitive hide felt good.

"Makes sense. I've gotten high while inflated with air before. It's great." Aside from trying to handle getting the munchies as a balloon. He was reluctant to admit he'd tried to reheat leftovers while still puffed up on more than one occasion, never successfully.

"Hey, why don't you try walking?"

Silas scoffed. "I've seen berries wobbling around, but I'm not sure I'm ready for that." He was betting on gravity to get the best of him while he remained filled to the brim with juice.

"It's easier than it looks, I promise." Ezra held his arms out from his sides. "The trick is to build up momentum by swaying and then pivot on your feet. Like this." The flamingo stiffly waddled around, never bending his knees or elbows. He looked ridiculous, but the display got the point across to Silas.

"Alright, I'll try. But don't expect much." Silas tensed up and attempted to tilt himself to the left with all his strength. His stretched hide

tingled and creaked, but he only managed to vibrate his body. He took a deep breath and tried again in the opposite direction, with similar results. “Shit, I’m huge.”

“At least you’re not also carrying around a few hundred pounds of fat on top of all that juice. If Jonas can do it, you can do it,” Ezra insisted.

Silas changed his approach. As a berry, he lacked his usual flexibility. He had to stop thinking about bending his knees or turning his hips. Instead, he had to think of himself as a giant ball. And with the mirror giving him a clear view of his massively inflated body, that wasn’t so hard.

Slowly but surely, Silas willed his juice-filled body to move. He wobbled one step forward, then another. With a series of wobbles, he even managed to turn himself. The effort left him winded and the creaking made him somewhat anxious, but he grinned at the success. “This is really cool, but I’m not gonna get anywhere fast waddling like this,” he laughed.

“Yeah, that’s why berries tend to be rolled. Speaking of which, do you want to try that out next?” Ezra smiled.

Some of Silas’ favorite activities while inflated were being bounced and rolled. He was too heavy to be bounced as a berry, so he couldn’t turn down the offer to be rolled. “Hell yeah!”

Ezra plucked Silas’ cowboy hat off their head and placed it on his own. He placed his talons on Silas’ front and nudged him. Silas bit his lip as pressure radiated from the point of contact. Pressure swirled his thoughts faster than any liquor, but the joy that accompanied it was lovely. Rolling backward felt like falling in slow motion. On instinct, he tried to catch himself, but of course, watermelons lacked the arms to do so. He merely wiggled his hooves instead as he gently rolled onto his back.

Upright, the zebra had been encumbered by his juice and able to do little aside from wobble. On his back, he became completely helpless. Being in such a precarious position riled him up. Another reason he adored inflation. Balloons and berries alike were at the mercy of others. Sometimes he wanted to give up control for a while.

Silas couldn’t see Ezra, but he could feel the flamingo’s talons brush along his taut side. “It’s gonna take a firm shove to get a berry like you rolling. Don’t worry about the pressure and the creaks, it’s normal.”

“This ain’t my first blimpy rodeo.” Silas smirked.

“It’s your first sloshy one, though,” Ezra replied from beyond the green curve of the zebra’s body.

Talons pushed deep into Silas’ side and he gasped from the pressure. Once his head stopped spinning, he realized his world still was. The rec room rotated around and around. The pool of juice inside him sloshed about heavily, adding a bit of a wobble to his roll. Filled with air, he felt like a toy to be tossed around, but filled with juice, he felt like a wrecking ball. He could’ve barreled over anyone in his path. He half-expected to flatten the couch upon reaching it. A part of him hoped he would.

Silas’ momentum rapidly slowed as he crossed the room. By the time he reached the couch, he merely bumped into it. The moan he’d been holding back poured out.

“I assume the roll was good?” Ezra chuckled.

Silas collected himself as best he could. Inflation always left him a flustered mess. “It was fantastic,” he answered, almost giggling. “The weight of the juice really packs an extra punch to it. I can’t believe I’ve never tried being a berry before.”

“Technically you’re a melon, but there’s not much difference. And the pressure’s wonderful, isn’t it?” Ezra leaned against Silas, who wiggled in joy.

“Maybe,” Silas said, his tone and wide smile betraying the understatement.

“Ready for roll two?” Ezra asked.

He got a nod in confirmation, and set about rotating Silas.

Ezra rolled the watermelon zebra back and forth for nearly an hour. He pushed them at various speeds, spun them around, and found creative ways to apply some pressure here and there, much to Silas’ delight. It offered simple entertainment for both of them. Silas enjoyed it even more than the cider tasting. After only a couple of rolls, he knew he’d be spending a lot of time in the future as a berry, preferably in the company of Ezra.

Though drunk and in bliss, Silas eventually decided to stop the fun, if only to give Ezra a rest. “Fuck, this is great. But I should probably get juiced now.”

Ezra didn’t protest. “Sounds good to me. I just need to get someone to help with the juicing. I can run the pump myself, but it’s a hassle.” The flamingo took out his phone and started texting, once again leaning upon

Silas, who gleefully accepted the surge in pressure. A minute later, the phone vibrated with a received text. "Sweet, we're good to go."

Ezra rotated Silas onto his back and rolled him out of the rec room and to the elevator. Like most elevators on campus, it was designed with berries in mind. Silas didn't brush against the doors going in, but he still touched the sides of two walls as he settled into a corner. Ezra clung to the wall. Silas rather liked filling most of the elevator. If he'd swelled a few more inches, Ezra would be squeezed between elevator and watermelon.

After the short ride, Silas found himself being rolled into the basement of the frat house, which he'd never seen before. He saw a doorway ahead flanked by warning signs and the universal juicing symbol: a nondescript round person being squeezed comically tight by a belt. Ezra didn't slow him down as they neared it, though. Instead, they rolled him right past the door and around a corner.

"Ezra?" Silas asked. "Wasn't that the juicing room?"

The flamingo didn't answer him. They came to a halt a few seconds later, and Silas was rolled upright. A rotund, yellow dragon stood before him. They were blubbery, with a perfectly curved belly that gave away the fact they were partially inflated.

"Yo, Jonas, what do you think?" Ezra asked the dragon.

"Hi?" Silas didn't get a response from either frat boy.

The massive dragon slowly circled Silas, his belly audibly sloshing from the juice within. He smacked Silas a few times on the side, prompting flustered whinnies. "A watermelon zebra is an inspired find. Beautiful colors."

"Um, thanks?" Again, Silas was ignored. The elation he'd been feeling while inflated rapidly drained from him.

"Will he work?" Ezra asked.

Jonas nodded. "Yep! I can't see any others beating him. Congratulations, Ezra, you got this year's prize berry."

The talk made Silas uncomfortable, but he laughed in the hope they were messing with him. "Real funny, y'all. Mind juicing me now?"

Jonas patted Silas. "The juicings will come later, once we've got you settled into your new home."

Ezra propped open a pair of double doors beside them. Jonas entered

the room, and Ezra rolled Silas in after. Berries lined the room, close to a dozen. They rested on squat, numbered pedestals. A few wobbled when the trio arrived, but the majority appeared to be overinflated and in a deep daze. They varied in size, color, and species. Among them, Silas spotted an enormous blueberry bear, a grape lion, and a cheery deer. He swore he'd seen similar combinations on some of the cider and soda labels.

"What's going on here," Silas demanded, struggling to add any sense of authority to his voice. Watermelons weren't particularly intimidating.

Ezra strolled into view and tilted the stolen cowboy hat on his head with a finger. "I may have had an ulterior motive for turning you into a watermelon, partner," he said, mimicking the zebra's mannerisms. "One of Rho Lambda's lesser-known traditions is the berry trophy room. Every year, we nab a single berry to put on display." He spread an arm towards the other berries. Silas suddenly realized the numbers on their pedestals were years, going back over a decade. "We only keep a dozen at a time to save on room, and you're this year's lucky winner."

Ezra rolled Silas onto the lone empty pedestal in the room, then turned him so he was upright. Silas looked around at the berries flanking him, eyes wide with fear. He tried to wobble free, but his hooves were off the ground and he couldn't gain any momentum. "Wait, you can't do this to me, I'm not a permaberry!"

"You will be by morning," Ezra said. "We make most of the trophies from scratch, since waiting for the perfect one to roll along would take too long."

"Please let me go, I don't wanna be a permaberry. I don't wanna be a trophy!" Thinking about how a few of the berries in the room had been stuck there for a solid decade shook him.

"Trust me, it's not so bad. You won't have to worry about school or work ever again, and you'll get plenty of visitors." Ezra rubbed Silas' side, occasionally pressing down to apply bursts of pressure. Even in distress, the zebra couldn't help but let out whimpering moans. "The juice you produce will be used in cider and soda, helping the frat thrive. I also get a pretty nice cash bonus for nabbing this year's berry."

"I'll pay you twice that to let me go!" Silas pleaded desperately.

"Ezra won't betray the frat that easily," Jonas said. "He knows if you

vanished under mysterious circumstances, we'd just have to replace you with a watermelon flamingo."

Ezra laughed along with Jonas, but there was a hint of nervousness to it. "Besides, you'll be spending most of your time from now on in a deep, relaxing pressure daze." He pulled out a bottle of cider. "So do yourself a favor and just give in."

Silas tried to tilt his head away from the bottle as Ezra reached over, but he had nowhere to escape. The tip of the bottle pushed into his mouth and the cider gushed in. The chill within him intensified, and he felt the juice stirring. Steadily, he began to puff up again. His frantically wiggling hooves were pulled into his body, leaving only dimples behind. His head sunk deep and his cheeks swelled, silencing him.

The watermelon zebra's hide creaked loudly and his internal pressure rose. Each spike jumbled his thoughts. Silas tried to concentrate and hold on, but he couldn't overcome the omnipresent pressure. Confusion pushed away fear, only to be pushed away in turn by euphoria. A dopey grin spread across the lost zebra's face. He forgot where he was, his mind dominated by the pressure.

Ezra stepped away from the watermelon, and Jonas nodded in approval. "Again, fantastic find. And the perfect replacement for the watermelon tiger we retired this year."

"I had a feeling it'd get some bonus points for that," Ezra said.

"You got him in just in time, too. I happened to overhear a few in the frat talking about submitting a dragonfruit flamingo. I'm not sure I'd have been able to turn down such a fine trophy." Jonas winked at Ezra.

Ezra hid his unease well. "Can't blame the guys for getting creative." A lie. He'd have to do some snooping and figure out who in the frat had considered putting him on display. There'd be a few more permaberries in the frat soon. Or puddles, more likely.

"Alright, I've got business to attend to. I'll get you your cash by the end of the day, and inform the rest of the frat we've got our trophy so no one wastes time being mischievous," Jonas said, before waddling away.

Ezra remained in the trophy room for a moment, surrounded by faint moans and sloshing. He patted Silas and smiled when the stupified zebra giggled. "No hard feelings, man. Hanging out with you was great, but I know

you'll make a better berry than a friend." He left Silas and the other berries behind, his thoughts already on the next berry he'd make.